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Making first-year tutorials count

*Operationalizing the assessment–learning
connection*

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ABSTRACT This article reports the design and effects of a practical, pedagogic experiment motivated by the wish to encourage greater ‘active learning’ in first-year tutorials along with a range of other learning skills, in particular the practice of ‘good’ argumentation. The project has its roots in a formal accredited programme in teaching and learning that provided frameworks for thinking about how to change the assessment regime and in a measure of dissatisfaction with the existing, ‘conventional’ organization of the tutorial as a site of learning. The aim was to create an environment in which the students prepared thoroughly for each tutorial, engaged in challenging discussion, and reflected on what and how they were learning. The method employed was to centre the assessment regime on the tutorial itself in conjunction with frequent and rapid feedback on student work.

KEYWORDS: *active learning, argumentation, feedback, formative assessment, information technology, reflection*

Introduction

A project called ‘Making (First Year) Tutorials Count’ was designed to require students to reflect on their own learning and on the process of discussion and argumentation so that they understand better the nature of ‘good’, that is, well reasoned and well supported, argumentation. It was also designed for the improvement of oral and written communication skills. The project originated in the conjunction of the first author’s own continuing professional development as a tutor (in the form of Keele University’s accredited course for teaching and learning in higher education, then led by the second author) and a concern, developed in over ten years of teaching, that ‘the tutorial’, defined as a group of between 8 and 18 students, often failed to fulfil its potential as a site of active learning.

Of particular interest was the question of how to operationalize the conceptual linkages that had emerged during the formal course on teaching between student learning and the assessment regime. Concerns about the first-year tutorial centred upon the theme that students were not fulfilling their own potential as active participants and that their own thinking about the subject matter was not being sufficiently developed, extended, or challenged. Preparation levels often appeared to be rather low or, if high, not reflected in students' actual contribution to the discussion. This might be due to differential levels of intellectual self-confidence, leading to variations in levels of participatory engagement among students, and/or a manifestation of 'utility-maximizing' behaviour by students who recognized that grades for the course depended principally upon achievement in essay and exam rather than tutorial performance. A higher level of intellectual proactivity and engagement was hoped for. All of these factors contributed to a sense that there was scope for greater individual and collective intellectual fulfilment which could, in part, be attained by establishing an environment in which students feel obliged to prepare and think about the topic in advance and in which, during the tutorial itself, they put forward their own opinions, have them challenged, and engage with the opinions of others. It was also thought important that students be 'rewarded' in terms of their efforts being reflected in the grades for the module.

Besides seeking to encourage greater research and preparation for the tutorial, the project also sought to pursue other learning goals. These included developing greater self-confidence in terms of oral communication skills, understanding of 'good argument', and reflection upon one's own learning post-tutorial, as well as upon the factors that had determined the path of discussion during the tutorial and which had led some points to be well received and supported within the group and others less so. At one level this understanding was expected to be in terms of the 'quality' of the points made, that is to say the clarity of their formulation and presentation, degree of knowledge and evidence that underpinned them, and appropriate use of supporting illustrations and examples. At a deeper level, it was hoped that this method would encourage appreciation of the views of others, and, in particular, that there might be good reasons why others may perceive issues differently or else approach them in a different way. At the same time, it was thought worthwhile that students should better recognize how other factors, such as efforts by participants to dominate a discussion or pursue diversionary behaviour, can marginalize certain voices and influence the quality of outcomes.

As a full-time academic lecturer in politics and international relations, not education, how did education theory help? Fundamental here was the concept of 'active learning', defined as opportunities for students to make

sense of the subject matter for themselves and often contrasted with 'passive learning' that characterizes the conventional student experience of lectures. These concepts are derived from constructivist views of learning which emphasise that:

1. Knowledge is actively constructed by the learner, not passively received from the environment.
2. Coming to know is a process of adaptation based on and constantly modified by a learner's experience of the world. (Jaworski, 1996: 2)

However, whilst lectures are often criticized in the educational literature (Bligh, 1998), tutorials, as opportunities for learning, seem to escape rather lightly (Abercrombie, 1989; Bligh, 2000; Wood and Moran, 1994). But, despite having used a range of 'active learning' approaches, for example students working on various exercises in a combination of small and large groups, the feeling that more could be done to develop active learning in tutorials remained. It was, however, the relationship drawn in the theoretical, pedagogic literature between student learning and the assessment regime that was especially thought-provoking.

A number of authors make the point that from the students' perspective the curriculum is defined by the messages that assessment regimes send to them (Black et al., 2003; Gibbs, 1995, 1999; Ramsden, 2003). Whilst part of this insight refers to the resources (principally time) students will devote to the various different demands of a module, there is a related point about the way in which the assessment regime sends signals to students about which activities are regarded by academic staff as more important than others. Important also is the extent to which the assessment regime is 'formative'. Formative assessment refers to the use of the assessment regime to deliver constructive feedback to the student as distinct from 'summative' assessment that indicates the mark and level of attainment. But, whatever the assessment regime, there is consensus that feedback is crucial for student learning. There is also some consensus that feedback that is likely to improve learning should be frequent and immediate (Angelo and Cross, 1993; Banta et al., 1996; Schwartz and Webb, 2002) and should 'connect' with students' understandings of what is expected of them (Hounsell, 1987, 2003). This is partly for the obvious reason that there is greater opportunity for students to evaluate progress across a range of areas, but perhaps also, because of what Hounsell (1987) refers to as the 'inter-subjective character of feedback' (p. 114). That is to say, students would be further motivated by the practice of iterated, individual, face-to-face discussion between the tutor and student over a relatively short time frame, in which there is both a level of consensus-seeking over the tutor feedback and willingness to listen and respond to the views of the student and comment on

specific areas of improvement (or lack thereof) based on previous feedback discussion (Black and Wiliam, 1998; Sadler, 1989; Scoggins and Winter, 1999). Further, there is some evidence that, for students, self-perception of increasing competence is one of the key drivers of greater motivation (Fazey and Fazey, 2001; Ryan and Powelson, 1991), which endorses Hounsell's point that 'motivation [is] less a personal attribute than a function of the relations between an individual and a situation' (1987: 117). Finally, Biggs' (2003) work illuminates the need to make the assessment regime congruent with the aim of actively engaging students in thinking and arguing.

Designing the assessment regime

The module in question was a first-year course designed to develop understanding of the historical, political, economic and cultural reasons why states perceive the world differently and how this is manifest in a range of contemporary foreign policy issues. There were approximately 100 students enrolled on this compulsory 20-credit module, with the project running for three successive years from 2001 to 2003. The course was taught through 15 lectures, one introductory two-hour tutorial and three further two-hour tutorials. The existing assessment regime comprised one 1500-word essay and one two-hour exam. Whilst departmental colleagues were generally tolerant when not supportive of the project, there was, nevertheless, a general expectation that the revised assessment regime would not add to the collective burden. Accordingly, something within a total of 3000 words of submitted work was in order. That this was a first-year module meant that the grades did not count towards the final degree mark. This in practical terms meant that there was greater willingness within the department to take risks with a radically new assessment regime.

The nub of the regime was to dispense with the essay and exam and put the two-hour tutorials at the centre of the assessment process. Hence five days prior to the tutorial students would submit, electronically, a 500-word 'briefing paper' designed to express their considered position on the question they were asked to address. The intention here, then, was to motivate students not only to read about and research a topic, but also to think about it and, indeed, to produce an academically credible, well-supported, reasoned and coherent stance on a particular question. This part of the assessment regime was designed to develop skills of writing, research and the preparation of an informed stance or argument on a particular question and to prepare the student for the active engagement being encouraged in the tutorial.

During the tutorial itself two or sometimes three principal activities

would take place. The first would be that students would discuss, in groups of three to five, their respective answers to the question in hand, based on the positions they had prepared in their briefing paper. Students were required to see how well their own arguments stood up to peer scrutiny and to reflect upon strengths and weaknesses in the light of the arguments of others. Student reflection on this part of the process was then expressed through an 'evaluation report' (of which more below). Second, at the same time as students were discussing their positions in small groups, the tutor discussed each student's own briefing paper with them individually for about five minutes. This discussion would focus upon many of the aspects common to assessing virtually any piece of written work: structure, coherence, use of evidence, clarity, use of sources and referencing, and the bibliography. Besides this general feedback, however, the tutor and student would also identify specific areas for the student to concentrate on for the next assignment. During the conversation the tutor continually sought affirmation that the student understood the point being made and why it was significant. The tutor would also give students written comments (but no marks) summarizing the main points. Third, the tutor would sometimes convene a whole group discussion in the latter stages of the two-hour meeting in order to work on some specific issue that had emerged in the course of reading the briefing papers, usually, but not always, to do with how to address an academic question.

Three days after the tutorial students would then submit, again electronically, a 500-word 'evaluation report' which summarized their thoughts both on how successful their own position had been in terms of persuading others, and whether and in what ways they had modified their own position as a result of the discussion. It was this part of the assessment regime that was designed to encourage and assess the higher learning goals of student self-awareness of their own learning, the development of students as reflective learners, and their appreciation of 'good' argument. Of course, as a tutor I hoped they would appreciate for themselves the value of wide reading and preparation and develop the ability not only to construct a case but also to anticipate possible objections or counterpoints. Implicit in this process was the ability to 'see the others' point of view', which was both fundamental to the pedagogic aims but also to the subject matter of the course: understanding the foreign policy of various different states. Indeed, if there is an ethical core to this model of assessment it is to be found here, for fundamental to 'political knowledge' in general and a major theme in contemporary social science is coming to terms with ideas of 'difference'. In this vein, the process of argumentation is itself a route to understanding, for one factor implicit in the activity of small group discussion is an appreciation of the point that others can interpret the world

differently for perfectly good reasons and that social and political knowledge often comprises the development of inter-subjective understandings (as distinct from verbally forcing one's view upon others).

This aspect of the assessment regime was intrinsically more challenging, being of a more abstract nature. However, even at a rather basic level, it required students to develop the skill of 'active listening', which is itself no small achievement. Part of the tutor feedback entailed encouraging students who had spotted differences in the arguments and claims of others to explore further whether there might be some points of overlap or consensus and what was actually at stake in the differences. These 'higher' educational aims embodied in the evaluation report were made clear in the 'criteria for assessment' that were included in the module outline that contributed to setting the context for what was done during the seminars and to clarification of the educational goals. In practice, the extent to which students came to grips with these aims varied, but my own strong impression is that many in the groups did broadly understand what was required, with a small number producing sophisticated accounts.

Completed comment sheets would be returned electronically, with a grade, within five days and certainly in time for the students to take the comments into account prior to embarking upon their next assignment for the module. This was important if the iterated character of the feedback regime was to be allowed the fullest opportunity for improving student performance.

The 'newness' of the regime was itself an issue, for not only were students faced with learning a new subject, but also a new set of assessment practices. Vital in mitigating the possible impediments to learning this might create was clear information about the schedule and deadlines on the reading list and an introductory tutorial at which the aims are explained and discussed and at which students themselves have the opportunity to analyse a sample briefing paper and evaluation report. The sample material, written by the tutor, was of a high standard in terms of analysing and engaging with the requirements of the question, structuring the piece accordingly, clearly stating the key points and supporting these with appropriate evidence and examples, through to credible interpretation and conclusion. Much time in the introductory tutorial was spent relating the paper and the report to the criteria for assessment and seeking to develop student appreciation of where the strength in the paper lay.

The role of the tutor

Whilst the role of the tutor as provider of constructive feedback and encouragement is clear enough, it is also important that the tutor seeks to

establish some form of consensus upon certain ground rules for discussion in small groups. Fundamental here is the importance of respect for the opinions of others, which is itself a prerequisite of the assumption that one must validate one's own subjective beliefs, opinions and knowledge claims through subjecting them to the oxygen of publicity and the scrutiny of others. Hence drawing attention to the difference between argumentation and persuasion, on the one hand, and domineering and bullying behaviour, on the other, was particularly important given that small groups were largely operating without a tutor present who in a conventional large group would intuitively play the role of discussion moderator. This said, however, students were themselves encouraged to be aware of this role, and by implication encouraged to adopt it.

For much of the tutorial the tutor was engaged in one-to-one discussion with individual students that itself contributes to a relatively non-interventionist role in the small group discussions. This, however, raises concerns, fuelled by overhearing factually misleading, misunderstood or poorly expressed points, over whether the students are learning enough 'hard facts' about the subject. Yet, the degree of control that a tutor should take to fulfil educational goals without stifling the learning capacities of students is an abiding dilemma in teaching (Readings, 1996; Stenhouse, 1972; Weimer, 2002). Accordingly, whilst this situation is not ideal, there are a number of factors that the tutor should bear in mind before intervening in small group discussion. The main counterpoint to concerns about knowledge-levels in small groups is that the tutor can use the opportunity of written and oral feedback on a one-to-one basis to leave the student in no doubt that the student's knowledge base of the subject is highly important and to correct any errors. Indeed, 'knowledge demonstrated' was one of the stated learning objectives and assessment criteria for the briefing paper. Beyond this, however, interpretation of small-group student discussion is not in fact straightforward. First, the situation might be evidence of students contributing points that, in a conventional tutorial, they may not have had the confidence to present for fear of making a mistake, particularly in front of the tutor. Second, within the small group there was the prospect of peer correction, which is itself educational in terms of the aims of this project. Third, whilst students might not get everything right under this method, there was no indication that they were learning more in terms of a subject's knowledge base under the old system.

Were the aims achieved?

The subjectivity of self-report can to some extent be mitigated by evaluation based on discussions between tutors on the module, relatively detailed

student feedback gained from end of module written evaluations, and by drawing again on educational literature. Ultimately, however, this project was a pilot scheme that readers are invited to evaluate in the light of their own teaching situations. In so doing, however, expectations need to be put into context. Total tutorial provision comprised eight hours, so even though the tutorials required much greater involvement in terms of student-hours there are, nevertheless, limitations as to what one might reasonably expect. Furthermore, these are first-year students studying in a context in which the unit of resource has decreased quite rapidly and Perry's (1999) study of students at Harvard in the 1960s demonstrated the difficult and gradual nature of intellectual development, even in comparatively generously resourced conditions. Such limitations noted, however, it is nevertheless probably more appropriate to evaluate the regime in its real-world context, that is in relation to the pre-existing assessment regime it was designed to replace rather than in relation to abstract or ideal conditions.

Conventional composition and writing skills had not been at the forefront in the design of this project, yet, probably the most tangible benefit of this method was improved written expression, including the skill of 'building' or 'crafting' one's points and arguments. This is directly related to how feedback was given. The 500-word word-limit impressed upon students the need to formulate their points concisely and to make every paragraph and sentence 'add value' to the overall argument. The typical weaknesses of structure, coherence, expression and clarity that one finds in first-year essays of 1500 words were replicated in this format, but direct and frequent feedback in which the students had annotated copies of their briefing papers returned to them enabled close and specific identification, discussion and monitoring of such weaknesses. The individual tutor-student conversations were surely important here in allowing a closing of the gap between my own and the students' expectations (Hounsell, 1987). This chimes with those who advocate that learning a discipline is less a matter of technique than of the 'social practice' and 'discourse' of the discipline, which is not necessarily easily entered into by students (James, 2000; Jones et al., 1999; Lea and Street, 2000; Lillis and Turner, 2001; Northedge, 2003).

The question of whether and to what extent the module developed oral communication skills is more difficult to answer, in part because these were assessed indirectly. Perhaps the most that can reasonably be said is that the necessity of presenting one's position in a small group, in conjunction with tutor feedback and encouragement to push one's position further, created appropriate conditions in which this aim could be realized (Hounsell, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). Or to put this differently, it would have been difficult to fulfil the requirements of the module or to have been present at a

tutorial without actively participating in the small group discussions. More broadly, both oral and written communication skills, at least in an academic context, are facilitated and reinforced by certain common characteristics such as knowledge of the subject and familiarity with the scholarly literature. There are two senses in which this subject knowledge could plausibly have developed student self-confidence. First, the notion of published academic work as an authoritative voice from which the student could gain a sense of and participate in an existing, 'live' debate provided both platform and support. Second, the notion of academic sources as authoritative grounding for the student's own position – encouraged through the use of scholarly practice such as referencing and footnoting – also enabled the student to take risks through being able to express uncertainties or pursue clarification or the development of points through referring to a third party's point or argument, rather than having to take full responsibility for a poorly understood but interesting position oneself. There was scope, then, for students to be interpreters as well as protagonists. The question of whether students developed as 'active listeners' can be answered with greater confidence owing to the evidence of reflection on their own and others' initial positions in the light of group discussion found in their evaluation reports.

Student evaluation of the module was highly positive. This is an important indicator: there is strong evidence that students' perceptions of the context in which they are learning influences their 'approach'; positive perceptions are associated with a 'deep approach' whereby they intend to make sense of subject matter and are more likely to be engaged with it (Prosser and Trigwell, 1999). In particular students valued the higher frequency of feedback and also the chance to concentrate on improving specific aspects of their work as identified in the feedback, therein illustrating the benefits of successive pieces of formative assessment. Iterative, formative and individual feedback is fundamental here. Many students did respond positively to the question of higher learning goals (student's own reflection on the learning process, ability and confidence to present an argument), but interpretation of these comments is not straightforward because one would hope that all discussion methods would lead to improvement in these areas – if only through greater practice. However, it can be reasonably supposed that the explicit identification and discussion of these as learning 'goals' registered and accelerated their development on the part of the student (Clegg and Ashworth, 2003; Ramsden, 2003). As one would expect, the great majority of students felt that they prepared more for tutorials under this method of assessment and most felt that the workload overall was either about the same or more than for the essay/exam format; few thought less. A number of students also

commented that they had to learn the subject in greater depth than for the essay/exam format.

Constraints and transferability

This project was made possible by a small HEFCE grant awarded by Keele University's Learning and Teaching Committee that enabled the member of staff to 'buy out' of some teaching in order to design the project and prepare the materials. Owing to departmental and career pressures for subject specific rather than pedagogic research it is unlikely that this project would have been undertaken without this grant. The project also benefited from a supportive Head of School and Assessment Tutor. Indeed, a supportive department and institution is probably a necessary condition for the development and successful running of such a project. Also, it is important that tutors on the course are sympathetic to the aims and method of the project or else at least approach it with an open mind.

A potential limitation of this regime arises from the short turnaround period for assignments. This meant that tutors have to make time available to deal promptly with student work and also imposes limits on the numbers of students each tutor can deal with. In practice, if one is assuming the tutor has a 'normal' full-time academic workload then a working maximum is something in the region of 30 to 34 students per tutor with a maximum of about 15–17 students per two-hour tutorial class. Essential also is the web technology and word processing skills in order to facilitate the electronic submission of work and return of comment sheets.

On balance, the overall workload for the tutor is probably slightly higher than for the essay/exam format, owing principally to the number of assignments that are processed. At the same time, however, the assessment load is contained within the teaching period itself, freeing more time outside of this period for research.

Whilst this assessment regime has high potential transferability across the political and social sciences, it is probably best suited to subjects in which there are a number of different perspectives. It is best thought of as one of a range of assessment regimes able to foster a certain range of skills in the student. As such, it is envisaged as a complement to and not a replacement for other forms of assessment in the first year.

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